

# The Creeks Tree Farms

*12 creeks that flow through 13 tracts give the farm its name.*

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**M**OST PEOPLE dream of owning a tract of land with a creek or spring flowing from it. But what if you bought 13 different tracts of land and 12 of them were located on creeks? That's what happened to Don and Lou East of Clay County, and that's also the how their tree farms got the name "The Creeks Tree Farms."

The East's 13 farms lie in the mountain and valley section of east central Alabama and are located in Clay, Randolph and Cleburne counties. The couple says they weren't looking for land with water supplies, but they are sure glad it happened. The Hatchet, Fox, Crooked, Buck, White Oak, School, Mad Indian, Camp, and Terrapin creeks flow through 12 of their 13 farms.

Don says that he couldn't help but become interested in forestry and the outdoors. In his youth he spent a lot of time in his grandfather's logging camps around Clay and adjacent counties. According to Don, several previous generations of his family were in the small sawmill business as well as being farmers. "My grandfather, Johnny Cleveland, taught me how to cruise timber and identify trees before I got the ABC's down pat in grade school," says Don. But it didn't take young Don very long to figure out that the sawmill and farming businesses in those days were hard work and low

pay. With no opportunity for a college education, he joined the U.S. Navy immediately after high school graduation in 1957 and remained on active duty for 36 years.

Don saved his money and in 1962 purchased his first 40 acres of timberland from his uncle for \$1,500. Buying timberland seemed like the natural thing to do. He knew the forestry trade and reasoned that if managed correctly it would probably supplement his Navy retirement someday, as well as provide him a place of his own in which to hunt.

## Acquiring Forestland

Throughout his career as a Naval flight officer, Don came home to Clay County as often as he could get leave. Each time he came home he spent almost all of his time buying additional timberland and managing what he already had. As one can imagine, it was sometimes difficult to arrange for timber harvests and reforestation projects when he was stationed on the other side of the globe. Through the assistance of agencies like the Alabama Forestry Commission and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (now the Farm Service Agency), he was able to continue his forestry programs as if he were home in Clay County.

While stationed in Spain, Don found a partner in the forestry business—his

wife Lou. They were married in 1983 while Don was a professor of Naval science at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Lou was raised in Florida and spent a lot of time in the outdoors with her father, Harvey Holland. With Don being of Creek Indian ancestry and Lou of Cherokee descent, they both had the same burning passion and respect for nature; they agreed to continue buying timberland in Alabama when they could find the right deals. By the time Don retired



*The Easts proudly display their TREASURE Forest number 1187 along with their sign.*



from the Navy in 1992, they had acquired a total of 570 acres and had used most of the available federal and state cost-share programs to assist in the management and improvement of their property.

After Don retired the couple moved to Clay County where Lou took a job at a local bank. Since 1992, they have acquired an additional 404 acres, and today own a total of 974 acres of timberland. Of the total, 525 is in pine timber with about half being planted pines and the other natural growth. The remainder of the timberland is in either mixed pine/hardwood or pure hardwood stands. Don says he envies those lucky enough to inherit forestland. "In our case we had to buy every single acre, and I think that gives us a greater appreciation for what we have accomplished." He adds that investing in timberland can be a profitable as well as a fun venture.

Don's interest in forestry and land management was increased when he became involved in both the Clay and Randolph County Forestry Planning Committees.

The timber and kindling stumps harvested off the East property over the years have paid for the land, and Don and Lou are excited that all future harvests will be profit. As is the case when you deal with Mother Nature, they have also had their share of bad luck over the years. They lost timber to the snowstorm of 1993, Hurricane Opal, tornadoes, ice storms, fire, pine beetles, and beavers. Fortunately, most of what they lost was still marketable. They say the only natural disaster they have managed to escape is an earthquake.

### **Involvement in TREASURE Forest**

The Easts first learned about Alabama's TREASURE Forest Program in 1993 and quickly fine tuned their management plan to become certified. Their

land was certified as a TREASURE Forest in 1996, and that same year Don became a member of the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association's Board of Directors as well as the TREASURE Forest county leader for Clay County. Since then, both Don and Lou have been heavily involved in the TREASURE Forest Program. Their farms were selected as the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award winner for the Northeast Region in 1999.

tion, aesthetics and environmental education. Like most TREASURE Forest owners, sharing their timberland and knowledge with others is one of the most rewarding aspects. They routinely have the local Clay County FFA and Randolph County Vocational School forestry students on their property to prepare for competition. A Boy Scout troop from Montgomery uses the camping site on Hatchet Creek each year to work on forestry and wildlife related merit badges.

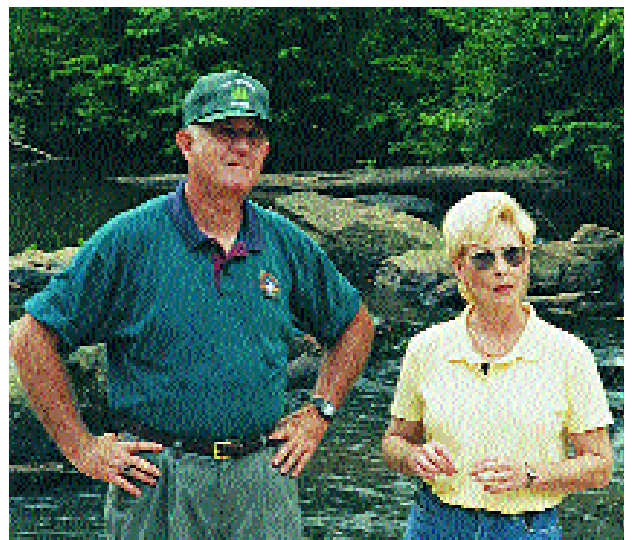


*Don and Lou have done much of the work on the farm themselves, like creating this picnic site.*

According to Don, he received many promotions, awards and decorations during his very successful career in the Navy, but being selected as the Mosley winner was the highlight of it all!

### **Management Objectives**

Don and Lou selected timber production and wildlife as their primary and secondary management objectives. Additionally, they manage for recreation, soil and water conserva-



*Don and Lou East*

The Easts also make an agreement with the nearby Servants in Faith and Technology training center to provide a forestry tour for each class of foreign students they host. These students are primarily from Latin America and Africa. The Creeks Farms are also a favorite place for the Clay and Randolph County Forestry Planning Committees to hold their landowner tours.

hands dirty during helping on the farm. She prefers fishing from her canoe and photographing the wide variety of wildlife and wildflowers on the property. Don's favorite recreational use of the farms are deer hunting, fishing and searching for Indian artifacts.

### Retirement Home

After retiring from the Navy and moving

back to Clay County, the Easts had a difficult decision in selecting a site to build their retirement home. There were so many beautiful places on their farms with scenic creeks, ponds and lakes that the decision was very difficult. Since they both wanted to be isolated as far back "in the sticks" as possible, they finally selected a 100-acre tract of mature hardwoods that is surrounded by an Alabama Power game preserve. The tract is on the shore of Lake R.L. Harris (known by locals as Lake Wedowee).

The Alabama Power Company had an agreement with the federal government which stipulated that the surrounding several thousand acres of game preserve could never be developed and could only be managed for timber and wildlife. This protected site was the ideal place for the Easts since "civilization" could not encroach on them. They built their home on this remote tract in 1992 and named it Buck Ridge.

Their home site is shared with a diversity of wildlife. Animals sharing Buck Ridge with the couple are cougars, bobcats, deer, coyotes, red and gray foxes, raccoons, opossums, armadillos, Canada geese, loons, ospreys, turkeys, eagles, hawks, owls and many other species. The couple has an understanding with the animals that they can have half of the large garden they plant each year, but the animals must leave the other half for them.

The Easts have three grown children. Don's son, Brant, is a career man in the U.S. Navy and his daughter, Amy, lives in Georgia. Lou's son, Keith, works with a restaurant chain in Florida. While the ultimate fate of The Creeks Tree Farms is uncertain, Don and Lou insist that if they ever sell their timberlands it will be to someone that shares their passion for good stewardship. The Easts are convinced that the American Indians were right in their belief that no one could own Mother Earth. Instead, it was for all to use, but also for all to take care of and to respect.

"We don't really own the land," says Don. "We are just borrowing it for a short time from future generations and we are therefore obligated to leave it in better shape than we found it." The Easts are doing just that at Buck Ridge on The Creeks Tree Farms. 🌲



*Clay County Manager Earl Smith talks with Lou and Don East about their property.*

Over the years, the Easts have marketed more than 700 MBF of sawtimber and almost 6,000 cords of pulpwood from their land. They have used almost every type of management technique including clearcuts, seed tree cuts, shelterwood cuts, select cuts, deferred cuts, seed-in-place cuts, prescribed burning, chemical release, mechanical and chemical site preparation, mechanical and hand planting as well as the construction of forest roads, stream crossings, and firebreaks. With the exceptions of timber harvests and reforestation work, the couple does all of their own labor on the farms, including creating picnic sites, building their own bluebird boxes, building and maintaining nature trails, maintaining forest roads and wildlife food plots and doing supplemental wildlife plantings. With their 13 farms being scattered over three counties, it takes up "quite a bit of my time," says Don.

Lou certainly doesn't mind getting her



*The abundant hardwoods on the East's TREASURE Forest provide beautiful fall color.*